



## Temple Dance Compositions of Tañcāvūr Marāṭhā Dynasty Ms Keerthy Unnikrishnan

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### Introduction

Temple dance as the name suggests is confined to the temple, and temple dancers are those dancers who perform in front of the sanctum sanctorum in the temple. Temple dance was a part of temple ritual, and it was performed to invoke the Gods during the religious and temple festivals as temples were the main centers for the society to evolve and cultures developed.

Temple dance compositions were developed under the patronage of the royal families and were unique depending on the dynasty. Some of the temple dance compositions are composed by the patrons who serve as kings or the court poets who praise the favorite deity or the king of the region. The main intention of composing temple dance compositions was to promote and propagate the culture in a diverse society and attract the people from all walks of society to the place of worship.

I began to realize there are various temple dance compositions in various dynasties written by the kings and royal poets during my master's program in Bharatanāṭyam. Most importantly, the story line of the dance contest between Lord Parameśvara and Kāli written by King Śahāji invoked a curiosity in me to study the temple dance compositions during the reign of Tañcāvūr Marāṭhā Dynasty. In this research paper, I chose to work on contributions of King Śahāji as his focus was on composing music for dance which led me to explore the different dance compositions composed by King Śahāji. The scope of studying the temple dance compositions is it is one of the two three dimensional objects that are available to the present and future generations to understand the temple dance traditions and history of Tiruvārur temple where Lord Tyāgeśā resides.

With the time constraint of the duration of my research fellowship, my study was restricted to choosing one ruler of the south Indian dynasty and briefly studying the temple dance compositions of one ruler. Also, the research paper is limited to study of temple dance compositions pertained to dance. A qualitative study methodology is implemented where the resources have been explored and according to the availability of sources study has been conducted.

### Temple Dance Compositions of King Śahāji

King Śahāji (1684-1712) was the second ruler of Tañcāvūr Marāṭhā Dynasty. He was known as Abhinava Bhojā who has proved his proficiency in languages like Telugu, Saṃskṛta, Marāṭhi, Persian and Hindī. He was a great scholar in Saṅgīta and Sāhitya. He has contributed to the world of art through drama, kāvya-s and nṛtya kāvya-s, in addition to the contribution by his court poets.

Majority of his compositions were based on his favorite deity, Tyāgeśā of Tiruvārur Temple and the temple dance compositions that prevailed during his time were practiced in the temple premises of Tiruvārur Temple. For all his compositions, he used the pen name or mudrā as 'Tyāgeśā' or 'Tyāga'. Few notable temple dance compositions that he composed are Śāṅkara Pallaki Sēva Prabandham, Tyāgeśar Kuravañji Nāṭakam, Śāṅkara Kāli Nāṭana Samvāda Nāṭakam and padās based on Tyāgeśā deity. Prabandhams based on Lord Tyāgeśā are discussed here.

### Prabandham

Prabandham are large musical units where several permutations and combinations of rhythmic patterns are observed which was identified in 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. Prabandhas are poetical composition or kāvya. From an original epic or mūla kāvya, an element is extracted and is elaborated into a piece of literature. It must contain a description of king, capital, mountain, river, love, marriage, sickness, sunset etc. There is no exact definition for Prabandham. These are usually long and tedious compositions composed in highly metrical style and have a poetic sāhityam. Permutations and combinations of rhythmic patterns would provide temple dancers to perform used to give 3 to 5 hours of dance composition. In early days, temple dancers used to work on these prabandham in ancient gurukul system and spectators had the capacity to judge the compositions. To summarize the concept of Prabandham, the present-day Varṇam is the extraction of some elements of Prabandham. Permutations and combinations of



Prabandhas are used in traditional theatre art forms in Kūcipuḍi, Bhagavathamēla Nāṭakam and Terukūttu.

## Śāṅkara Pallaki Sēva Prabandham

Śāṅkara Pallaki Sēva Prabandham is a Telugu Yakṣagāna- Prabandham composed during the reign of King Śāhāji. This describes the palanquin service (Pallaki Sēva) of Śivā as Thyagarāja in Tiruvārur Temple and it has been performed during the annual Brahmōtsavam festival in Tiruvārur Temple for over two hundred years. This opera is written in Telugu and detailed study of the opera has been done in the past that helped us to understand the rich knowledge of our olden tradition and the essence of rich literature.

Śāṅkara Pallaki Sēva Prabandham comes under structured Prabandham, where there are 22 darūs (story songs) and 21 verses that includes 1 Cūrṇikā, 8 Kanda padyas, 1 Sīsa padyās, 2 Utpalamālas, 3 Caṃpakamālas, 4 Dvipādas and 2 Gītas (verses). In different rāgas and tālas darus and verses are composed where the richness of the music is observed.

This opera has evolved round the theme of Kamalāmbā's desire to unite with her hero, Lord Śivā, which is fulfilled finally. In Tiruvārur temple, goddesses Kamalāmbā, the deity facing Īśānya (North-East direction) is praying for the union with the Lord Śivā. According to the story, Pārvathi unable to bear the pang of separation with her Lord, sends her sakhis to request Him to come to her. The opera starts with an invocation to Gaṇeśa. The sakhis go in search of the Lord Parameśvara and finds that he is seated on the throne surrounded by divine personages. The sakhis discuss among themselves to find out the ways to approach the Lord as he is sitting in the throne. A suggestion is made by a sakhi whether the Lord can be approached through Gaṅgā adorning His head. Another sakhi replies that Gaṅgā will not respond to their call, and that she is a woman born with arrogant mannerism. They then think of approaching the deer who is adorning Lord's hand. Another sakhi replies in a humorous manner that it is too much to expect from an animal to understand the nuances of conveying a message. Another suggestion is made to approach Him through the serpent adorning Śivā's neck. Another sakhi replies that the poisonous snake cannot be trusted at all and that it cannot understand the sentiment of love. They finally think of approaching the Moon adorning the head of Śivā. Other sakhi replies that moon is untrustworthy, and he is merciless, co-born of 'Hālahalam', the concentrated poison. Ultimately, sakhis take a bold decision to approach the Lord directly and convey the request of Goddesses Pārvathi. The sakhis present their request to Śiva. The lord is moved and orders for the palanquin. Śivā gets into the luxuriously decorated and lavishly furnished palanquin and starts to move. The songs of palanquin bearers are simple, and they proceed with the Lord step by step by singing the verses of the Lord. Pārvati eagerly waits for him as Lord approaches her. Devas offer their tribute one by one to the Lord. The union takes place, and the play concludes with the Maṅgaḷam.

## Tyāgeśār Kuravañji

This research paper focuses on Tyāgeśār Kuravañji which was one of the two dance compositions performed in Tiruvārur temple during the time of King Śāhāji and it was written in Marāṭhi and Tamil. Lord Tyagesha, the presiding deity of Tiruvārur is the hero in this composition and the imaginary heroine is Rājamōhini. It is believed that King Śāhāji himself was considered as Mohini who had love and devotion to the Lord. This is a unique Kuravañji Nāṭakam where we do not come across the common things prescribed in most Kuravañji Nāṭakams. The role of Kaṭṭiyakkāran to announce the appearance of hero or Lord Tyāgeśā is not seen here and there is no indication of the heroine, Rājamohini seeing or having seen Lord Tyāgeśā. The poet has left to the choreographer to compose it as per his/ her imagination. Apart from that, this story of this Kuravañji continues in a similar format like other Kuravañji Nāṭakams. The conversation between the heroine, Rājamohini and Kuratti is seen, and during which Kuratti boasts of her professional skills and mentions the names of people who have benefitted by her forecasting skills. Kuratti requests Rājamohini to pray to the Gods and kuratti invokes all the deities and reads the palm of Rājamohini and gives verbal description of the person whom she is in love with, who is none other than the Lord Tyāgeśā and predicts the auspicious day that Lord will take Rājamohini into his abode.



A unique feature of Tyāgeśār Kuravañji is it is enacted in the temple dance tradition and **Konḍi's** family of Tiruvārur used to perform in every festival of Tiruvārur. Majority of the kuravañjis were on Lord Śivā and very few were based on Lord Muruga and rarely on Lord Viṣṇu which is Aḷagar Kuravañji is seen. The music of the Kuravañji Nāṭakams constitutes classical music, semi-classical music and folk music which is an entertainment for all the sections of the society. An important point to be noted is that in any Kuravañji Nāṭakams, no marriage takes place because marrying the God by a mortal is not possible.

## Śaṅkara Kāli Naṭana Saṃvāda Nāṭakam

This is a multilingual dance drama written by King Śahāji in Telugu, Marāṭhi and Saṃskṛt. The temple dance composition is also named as Tyāgarāja-vinōdha-citra Prabandham. The entire play is written by King Śahāji in Telugu and the entire dance drama is written in seven chapters. The first and seventh chapter of the text concentrates on the dance segment which are known as Salāmu daru and Jakkini Daru. The chapters in between are focused on the musical composition detailing several rāgas, tālas and several languages in one song. This text describes the narration of dance contest between Śiva, Tyagarāja svāmi of Tiruvārur temple and Goddess Bhadrakāli. The language used for the conversations between dance play is Saṃskṛta and colloquial Marāṭhi.

Sūtradhāra introduces the play in every scene and his narrations are in Saṃskṛta, Telugu and Marāṭhi. Goddess Kāli and Śiva are the main characters of the play. In Salāmu Daru, Kāli's abilities in dance and playing musical instruments are described here and boasts about her skills to her sakhi. Nārada appears in the scene and talks about Śivā who is more talented than her. Nārada creates a situation where Lord Śivā and Goddess Kāli meet each other. Lord Śivā indicates as both are equally skilled, he will exhibit an exceptional skill and if Kāli performs the same, she becomes superior between two. She challenges him. Then the Lord performs the *Danḍapāda Tāṇḍavam* where he lifts his leg above his head. As Kāli understands that the Lord has performed *Purushanāṭyam* and that it is inappropriate for women to perform, she accepts the defeat and bows down quietly before Śiva.

Kāli requests her sakhi to approach Lord Parameśvara to marry her. The sakhi listens to her and conveys the message to Lord Śiva which he agrees to marry her. To witness the marriage, Nārada, Kinnaras and Kimpuruṣas are present who sings Maṅgaḷam in praise of Lord. Finally with the praise of the Lord, Tyagarāja Vinōda Chitra Prabandham is completed, and poet finally says that he offers his prayer to Śrī Sadā Śiva.

## Conclusion

Prabandhams described here were performed in different festivals of Tiruvārur temple by the devadāsis during the reign of King Śahāji. He had allocated 10 *velis* of land to ensure that the performance continues for all the time, but due to the lack of patronage the tradition of performance is lost. These multi-lingual dramas come under Mīśra Prabandham, where the inspiration of theme is from the epics, and the dance drama is composed as per the author's choice of preference.

King Śahāji has composed the temple dance compositions in different perspectives. In Śaṅkara Pallaki Sēva Prabandham, work is represented in a dramatic aspect where the story is represented by dialogues and actions. This is mainly observed in the conversation between the sakhis to approach Lord Tyāgeśā and in the conversation of the palanquin bearers who carries Lord Tyāgeśā. In Śaṅkara Kāli Naṭana Saṃvāda Nāṭakam, emphasizes was given on the different dance forms that prevailed during the time of King Śahāji and in the conversation between the Lord and Goddess, different characteristics of Lord Tyāgeśā are described here. In Tyāgeśār Kuravañji, it is the only Kuravañji Nāṭakam that is danced in the temple and is enacted in the temple dance tradition. The beauty of the Kuravañji Nāṭakams were to promote and propagate culture through dance and drama.

As the Marāṭhā Dynasty expanded through the regions of Mahārāshṭra, Tamiḷ Nāḍu, Karnāṭaka, Gujarāt, Uttar Pradeś and Madhya Pradeś, the use of four to five languages was quite common in their activities of administration, trade and in routine life. Therefore, multilingual literary culture was a common thing those days, where no training was needed for the common people to understand and enjoy the dramas.



## Acknowledgements

This research work would not have been possible without the research fellowship received from the Junior Research Fellowship by CCRT, Ministry of Culture. I am indebted to Dr. Karuna Vijayendra who provided constant encouragement, support, and guidance during my research work. I would also like to thank Dr. S. Raghuraman who provided abundant information on certain topics of my research work.

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